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SUBJECT: BULGARIAN PARLIAMENT FIRES SPEAKER: DEATH KNEEL FOR GOVERNMENT OR SACRIFICIAL LAMB?

Ref: Sofia 217

Classified by Amb. James Pardew for reasons 1.4 b & d

1. (C) SUMMARY: The Parliamentary speaker was ousted February 4 in the opposition's first step in a march to bring down the government. Debate on a motion of no confidence is scheduled to begin February 9, when the opposition will have to muster at least 2 more votes to achieve success. A key Parliamentary group - the New Times - told us it has confidentially proposed a Parliamentary union with the governing coalition in exchange for supporting the government. Finance Minister Milen Velchev, who is leading the government's defense, told the Ambassador he is mildly optimistic the government will survive.

#### OPPOSITION PICKS OFF THE SPEAKER

2. (C) Parliamentary Speaker Ognyan Gerdzhikov, of the ruling National Movement of Simeon II (NMS), was voted out of office by a 119-114 margin, with one abstention. Three NMS MPs crossed sides to vote with a united right-left opposition to oust the speaker. The rest of the NMS and its junior coalition partner the Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedom (MRF) voted in his favor. If this voting pattern holds, the opposition needs only two more votes to succeed in its no-confidence motion (121 votes in a 240-seat Parliament). However, it is unclear whether all who voted against the speaker will also vote against the government. Key votes in the speaker's downfall came from the New Times MPs - a splinter group of 13 MPs, which broke from the NMS last year.

3. (C) The formal complaint against the speaker was "systematic abuse of power and violations of parliamentary procedures." The complaint stems primarily from a Parliamentary debacle January 28 when Gerdzhikov engineered a lack of quorum that allowed Economy Minister Shuleva to ignore a Parliamentary request for information on a major privatization deal. A united opposition (and some members of the ruling coalition) viewed this as a serious breach of protocol that also undermined Parliament as an institution. Their outrage led to Gerdzhikov's removal and the no-confidence motion. Parliament now has 14 days to elect a new speaker. While no one has been formally nominated, Anastasiya Moser, leader of the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union is the most frequently mentioned replacement. NT Deputy leader Borislav Tsekov told the press that Moser is the only person equally acceptable to the Socialists and Center-Right opposition.

#### FUTURE KINGMAKERS

4. (C) Miroslav Sevlievski, a leader of the NT, told us privately his party's "goal is not to topple the government." Rather the party is working behind the scenes with the PM to form a parliamentary union with NMS and MRF to better position itself ahead of the June Parliamentary elections. NT's current two percent support is well below the 4 percent necessary to enter the Parliament. To ensure its survival, it is trying to force the pre-election coalition. NT publicly is calling for the removal of at least Shuleva and may be after it's own cabinet positions, - although this does not appear to be a deal breaker. Sevlievski stressed to us that the Prime Minister "is not their political rival, in fact it is quite the opposite." Sevlievski also highlighted that by taking on NT as a coalition partner, the government will ensure there will not be any "drama" surrounding Bulgarian troops in Iraq or the April 25 EU accession signing.

#### NO-CONFIDENCE VOTE AND NEXT STEPS

5. (C) With no call for an extraordinary session over the weekend, the Parliament will next meet Wednesday, February 9. On the evening of Feb. 8, Parliament will set the next day's agenda, which could include the official debate on the no-confidence motion. Under this scenario, the earliest the vote will take place is Thursday February 10 and the latest is the 16th or 17th. A delay in the vote is seen as beneficial to the ruling party, allowing it to slow momentum and provide time to cut a deal with NT and others.

6. (C) If the government loses the vote, NMS, as the largest party in Parliament, will have seven days to create a new government. If it fails, the second largest group, the Socialists, will receive the mandate. If it also fails, the President can pick any parliamentary group to try its hand at forming a government. And as a last resort, the President can appoint a caretaker government until elections are held.

#### MINISTERS'S FATE

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17. (C) There has been much speculation about the fate of several Ministers, including Economy, Culture and Interior. Although press and commentary is focusing on Shuleva joining Gerdzhikov as sacrificial lambs, the PM is very loyal to his people and may not

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give in to such pressure. Her fate lies with any final deal constructed between the NMS, MRF and NT.

#### COMMENT

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18. (C) The government's clumsy handling of a privatization deal has allowed the Socialists to rally all opposition parties to a no-confidence motion. While the threat is very real, the Government will be scrambling this weekend to make the best deal it can to save itself, although likely in a weakened state.